

Feral attraction: animal ‘stars’ in the Roman arena

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Spectacle entertainments in the Roman world were studded with stars, performers whose reputation has earned them a personal following. Even discounting inscriptions, from literary sources alone we know by name a remarkable number of actors, pantomime artists, charioteers, and gladiators. We must imagine these people attracting huge crowds to their performances. In chariot-racing and gladiatorial combat, the element of personal competition almost demands the naming of the protagonists; even though a charioteer represented a particular faction, he drove his chariot on his own, and was known by name for his accomplishments, and a gladiator did not usually fight as part of a group, but as one member of a pair, pitted against a single opponent.

Naming animals

The general impression of beast-displays, on the other hand, is of vast numbers of animals indiscriminately killed. Overwhelming us with statistics, Augustus boasts, ‘I gave beast-hunts of African beasts ... on twenty-six occasions, in which about 3,500 beasts were polished off’ (*Res Gestae* 22.3). In the pictorial record, however, the emphasis is on individual pairings: deadly encounters between man and beast, the outcome depicted in graphic detail. This transference of individual pairings from the gladiatorial to the bestial sphere invites the naming of the protagonists. Gladiators usually adopted what sound like ‘speaking names’, conveying the impression with which a formidable opponent should be associated, although it is sometimes difficult to determine the resonances that a name would suggest. *Narcissus*, for instance, suggests a beautiful body but hardly a fighting spirit; perhaps a famous name from myth was all that mattered, rather than the fate that overtook the mythological namesake.

A personal relationship with something requires it to be given a name. Some of us name our cars; even if the name is simply the species, ‘Car’ with a capital C (‘Oh, Car, please start’), to address it, to get its attention, it has to be given a name. One can readily see that an animal trained to perform tricks will require a name (just like a car). Occasionally the names of

performing animals are preserved from antiquity, such as the bears depicted in a mosaic from Radès in Tunisia (below). Their names essentially reflect the same range as gladiators’ names. *Gloriosus* (‘Full of glory’) and *Braciatius* (perhaps ‘Strong-armed’) denote innate or physical qualities, names suitable to performers. *Simplicius* should mean something like ‘Frank’. *Alecsandria* and *Nilus*, Egyptian toponyms, may seem at first sight unsuitable, since bears in Roman times are very unlikely to have been native to Egypt; but perhaps the overtones are simply ‘exotic foreign clime’, ‘famous’. *Fedra*, with its phonetic spelling, has a similar resonance from the mythological realm. The fluidity of nomenclature, its categories shared by both gladiators and beasts, is noteworthy.

Trained animals, like the pole-climbing *Fedra*, would be expensive investments with, potentially, a long career ahead of them. But it is surprising to find named animals being hunted and killed in the arena. One might expect some inhibition about killing an animal with a personal name. Perhaps, however, we should think in terms of paired protagonists: where animals are depicted in single combat with humans, they occasionally have names. The status of performers as ‘other’ on the Roman social scale makes it easier to accommodate animals on the same nominal terms as human beings. The case of four leopards from Smirat in Tunisia is particularly instructive (above). *Mamertinus* (‘Man of Mars’) is a human,

appropriately paired with *Romanus* (‘Roman’), a leopard; *Hilarinus* (suggesting *hilarus*, ‘cheerful’) was presumably paired with *Luxurius* (‘frisky’) before he left the beast to die, fatally wounded, and came to help *Bullarius* polish off *Crispinus*. Perhaps it is too fanciful to see *bullā*, ‘bubble’, at the root of *Bullarius*’ name and *crispus*, ‘curled’, at the root of *Crispinus*’ (i.e. two round shapes). *Victor*, a leopard, bears a name commonly used of gladiators; *Spittara*, unfortunately, is opaque. Overall, the names of the human and animal protagonists seem virtually interchangeable; they are all performers, regardless of species.

Magerius’ leopards

If the pairings are deliberate, we see here the Roman love for playing etymological games with names, although it is disturbing to see the naming of animals whose death-agonies are so graphically depicted. One way to try to understand what we are seeing is to approach the pairs as equally matched opponents, crowd-pullers. In the inscription accompanying this mosaic, the herald asks the spectators whether the Telegenii, the company staffing the spectacle, should be reimbursed by Magerius, the sponsor, at the rate of 500 *denarii* for each leopard. The spectators are very enthusiastic. But, as we can see from the symbol on each of the moneybags on the herald’s tray, which represents 1,000, Magerius actually doubles the fee. So, the mosaic displays his *munificentia* (‘generosity’); but it also tells us that the leopards were the standard by which the success of the show was measured.

Were the animals just a commodity – so many leopards’ worth of entertainment – or were they stars, very expensive but ultimately expendable? Just as a sponsor would pay more for a gladiator whom he had hired and failed to return alive to his trainer – according to the legal author Gaius, fifty times more (*Institutes* 3.146) – so the fee for Magerius’ display is reckoned by leopards: dead *named* leopards. It seems plausible, if completely unattested, to infer that the leopards featured prominently in the advertisement for the spectacle, probably by name. Still, it is difficult

to fit evidence like Magerius' leopards to the definition of 'star' with which I started: if they had not fought before, can we speak of a 'personal following' for them? And, if they had fought before, had they mauled their opponent but survived to be chased back into their cage and brought out again later?

In the case of wild animals that are meant to fight, surely what matters is their potential to put on a good show, rather than their proven track record. In that case, the point of naming them may be associated with laying bets on the forthcoming contest. Maybe the public could view an animal in its cage beforehand and estimate the likely result of its encounter with its human protagonist. The evidence for betting in the amphitheatre is much slighter than for the circus, where we know that gambling was a major preoccupation. But, if the public laid wagers on Magerius' leopards and the other fighting beasts who were known by name, we are then dealing with a different sort of stardom: potential, rather than proven.

Domitian's lion

One source of information about animals that potentially starred in the arena is entirely lacking: their epitaphs. But Statius composed a poem commemorating a tame lion that had been mauled by another animal; even its cage was miserable (*infelix*) without it (*Silvae* 2.5). Statius appreciates the irony of the situation: the lion had mastered all its natural instincts, and where does that leave it? Dead. But this is not to say that he is mocking the entire process of taming wild animals and teaching them to perform tricks. Despite the paradox that Domitian's lion was not trapped or hunted to death but was ignominiously attacked by another animal, it died bravely, like a warrior, panting but facing the enemy. At the end of the poem, Statius explicitly likens the lion to a famous gladiator, fallen on the sand. Here is a rare opportunity to witness a moment of empathy between the Roman public and a veteran animal that is accidentally killed in the arena; the entire audience mourned its death, and the expression on the face of the emperor Domitian registered his distress at the loss of this one lion among so many expendable beasts from all over the world.

Clearly, this lion was a favorite among the spectators, presumably a familiar 'turn'. It was used to the constraints of captivity (*suetus*) and also a favorite among its fellow-lions, a nice conceit evoking the well-known camaraderie of a gladiatorial troupe. In the feline equivalent of the human pose of respect, with head bowed and solemn expression, the lions' manes droop and they furrow their brows. The poem, of course, is not deadly serious: it is built upon a conceit, treating

the death of a lion like the death of a famous person, and anthropomorphizing the lion and its fellows. If Domitian had been a fan of this lion, as apparently everybody was, then he must have been pleased to have it commemorated in this whimsical way. Famous this lion certainly was, and yet anonymous: a 'star' without a name.

The Flavian rhinoceros

Another anonymous animal apparently went one better, achieving the superstar status represented by not just literary commemoration but a portrait as well. A *quadrans* minted under Domitian between A.D. 83 and 85 features a rhinoceros. This coin, the lowest denomination of the Roman currency, would have had a very wide circulation. It therefore stands to reason that the image chosen for it is something that absolutely everybody must see. No rhinoceros had been exhibited at Rome since the time of Augustus. But in the fragmentary collection on spectacles ascribed to Martial, there are two poems about, precisely, a rhinoceros (*Liber Spectaculorum* 11 and 26).

These epigrams are remarkable for their precision of zoological detail within a tight compass. The white rhinoceros, in particular, appears very docile, but will suddenly manifest extremely aggressive behavior, flaring up and charging with its head held low, which is exactly the posture conveyed by *pronus* ('headfirst'). The same animal turns up again later in the collection. As before, the rhinoceros was very slow to get going, but, in a clear cross-reference, Martial remarks that eventually it showed its previous spirit. The rhinoceros tossed two bullocks 'on his pliable neck' (*facili ceruice*), which precisely conveys the scooping motion with which a rhino spikes his prey and throws it behind him. An aurochs and a bison got out of his way, and a lion was in such a panic that it charged straight at the guards waiting with spears at the ready. So why complain about the slow start, asks Martial? It is easy to see that the rhinoceros was a real star, with a reputation for putting on a good show.

Is this the animal depicted on Domitian's coin? It is carrying its head low, like the African rhinoceros (it has two horns, so it must be an African species, either the black or the white). It has the barrel-shaped body of a rhino, and it is whisking its tail as rhinoceroses do (there is plenty of room for the die-master to have depicted it hanging down, if he had wanted to). Only the hind legs are wrong: they should be pillar-like, graviportal ('load-bearing'), to support the weight of the enormous body, instead of having a pronounced joint, like the hind legs of a dog. I think it should not worry us that,

assuming that the coin and both the epigrams commemorate the same animal, the rhinoceros is nameless. It would not be named on a coin anyway, and in Martial's epigrams there is no room to name names. In any case, if you are the only one of your kind, you don't need a name: you are Rhinoceros. It is hard for us to imagine never having seen a rhino; but its novelty will have catered to just that jaded instinct among the Roman public that sponsors exploited by inventing ever more extravagant displays and cultivating exotic new 'stars'.

Savagery, suffering, and the gambling instinct

So, can we place these starring animals in a more general context? The ambiguous status of gladiators, socially worthless performers with a huge following, makes it easier for animals to play similar roles. The physical spectacle of the animal's co-ordination and the temperament it displayed must have been of great interest to a public without television or YouTube. The 'us and them' mentality in the Roman world presumably put up a barrier between the animals' suffering and the spectators' sensibilities. (The fate of Domitian's lion was lamented because it was accidental.) Children were desensitized to animal suffering by such practices as cock-fighting, which was an integral part of pet keeping in the Roman world, a means to inure children to the sight of pain and death. Our modern sense of a fragile ecology and the erosion of species was utterly unknown in antiquity; the spectators could watch with fascination and a clear conscience.

The amphitheatre is about displaying the wonders of nature and controlling the animal kingdom. But, like the circus, it is also intensely competitive: who will win? This is an attitude that breeds gambling, and potentially stardom too. The gaps in our record make it difficult for us to spot the animal stars in the amphitheatre, but they seem to have existed in two categories: animals trained to perform tricks, which appear repeatedly in the arena and thereby gain a personal reputation (like Domitian's lion); and savage beasts that may only appear once, to kill or be killed. For the latter category, the build-up to their appearance may have been huge and the names associated with them may be explicable, if the public was betting on the outcome of the engagement.

The only circumstances that really qualify an untrained beast for 'stardom' in the sense in which I defined it at the beginning are illustrated by the Flavian rhinoceros, which kept the audience on tenterhooks with its apparent reluctance to fight, and then worsted its opponents in a phenomenal show of strength, and was evidently sufficiently comfortable with its

Italian diet to be shown a second time – and maybe again after that. Alongside a sentimental attitude towards their domestic pets and a megalomania for amassing statistics of beasts killed and money spent, the Romans were also probably gambling on the savagery that they hoped to see in the arena; and very occasionally the bravery and spirit of an individual beast may have captured the loyalty of the roaring thousands in the stands.

If you want to know more try looking at George Jennison's *Animals for Show and Pleasure in Ancient Rome*, originally published in 1937 but reprinted in 2005, or at Jocelyn Toynbee's *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, of 1973.

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